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**Sackcloth and Ashes**

General Synod Participants Hold a Peace Vigil at Tampa's MacDill Air Force Base
By Rev. Joyce Hollyday

The early-evening Tampa sky shimmered with shades of aqua and gray, as a breeze stirred and dark-blue thunderclouds gathered on the horizon. Pointing over my head, a man standing directly opposite me in our circle outside the front gate of MacDill Air Force Base shouted, "Look!" Doubting that any sight could be more stunning than the luminous expanse before me, I turned and was startled to discover a large rainbow, vibrant with color, arcing over the base.

MacDill serves as Central Command for the U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East. It also hosts the United States Special Operations Command, which plots and oversees such military ventures as the assassination of Osama bin Laden. On the eve of Independence Day, forty General Synod attendees boarded a bus outside the Tampa Convention Center and rode to the base, where a few locals joined us for a worship service and peace vigil.



Several of us had spent the day before Synod opened in a workshop titled "Fallen Is Babylon: American Empire and the Commonwealth of God."

The event, co-sponsored by the Southeast Conference's

Theology Among the People (TAP) Program and UCC Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM), was hosted by Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson and First United Church of Tampa. Rev. Tom Warren, pastor of Pleasant Hill Community UCC in Tennessee, began the day with an in-depth analysis of the military, economic, and social expressions of empire. Rev. Joyce Hollyday, co-pastor of Circle of Mercy UCC in Asheville, North Carolina, guided participants throughout the day through Revelation's disturbing images of the seductions of empire and held up the book's powerful call to "come out of Babylon." Edith Rasell and Sandra Sorenson of JWM offered insights on creative and faithful responses to empire, while Rev. Kathy Clark, Associate Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference and director of the TAP Program, grounded the day in prayer and worship.

Our appearance at MacDill Air Force Base was an extension of that worship, offered in a spirit of resistance and the hope of transformation. We listened to the story of the prophet Jonah's journey to Nineveh, where the king donned sackcloth and sat in ashes



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as a sign that all his realm should "turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands" (Jonah 3:8). A similar hope had brought us to MacDill's front door. Hearing that God was so moved by the king's gesture of confession and repentance that God underwent a change of mind and heart and saved the city from calamity, we petitioned for an equal dose of mercy there under the rainbow's glow.

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As Rev. Warren began placing pieces of sackcloth over the shoulders of the participants, a gentle rain began to fall. He asked if we should cut our worship short, but a unanimous acclamation for continuing rose from the circle. By the time Revs. Clark and Hollyday began imposing ashes on foreheads with the blessing "Know the mercy and peace of God," the rain was a pelting downpour. Still, the participants refused to be deterred from their witness, staying until the last strains of the closing song: "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside..." A benediction appropriate to the occasion was offered: "Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Clothes and signs were dampened—soaked, actually—but spirits definitely were not, as we climbed back on the bus to return to Synod.

Keeping vigil outside MacDill, I was reminded of a dream I had during the first Gulf War, in which nuclear missiles arced into the sky from all directions. Immediately after they were launched, the jet trails they left behind turned into rainbows. The dream's imagery felt to me like a natural "swords into plowshares" promise of peace. I remembered consulting the story of Noah after waking up from the dream, searching out God's placement of the rainbow in the sky as a sign of the promise never again to destroy the earth through a flood. "When the bow is in the clouds," announced God to Noah, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature" (Genesis 9:16). God voices that sentiment four times in ten verses, as if God needed to convince Godself. The rainbow, I realized then, was intended as a reminder not for us, but for God.

The rainbow is mocked, and God's patience is tested, whenever destruction rains from the skies, and with each new war that is launched. We went to MacDill Air Force Base to confess our complicity in the suffering and plead for an end to it. And to give thanks for God's continuing mercy.



[Link here to view and read](#) continued coverage by Tampa's WMNF about the "Fallen Is Babylon" event.

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